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PERCEPTIONS ON THE AGING POPULATION: DISPARITIES AMONG GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

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PERCEPTIONS ON THE AGING POPULATION: DISPARITIES AMONG
GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Ashlee Crosson
Kelsey Goodwin

June 2019

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ABSTRACT

Social workers are needed to meet the needs of the growing aging population. Yet, there is a shortage of social work students entering the field of gerontology as opposed to child welfare, school social work, or family services. The proposed study used a qualitative research design to explore why social work students are underrepresented in areas that serve older people. A sample of 58 graduate social work students from several universities in Southern California completed open-ended questions on a scale (N = 58). Thematic analysis of the data revealed four major factors that account for the underrepresentation of social work students in gerontology. These were: (a) lack of knowledge about gerontology, (b) misconceptions about the elderly populations, (c) lack of incentives, and (d) preference for other social work areas. These findings hold major implications for theory, research, policy, and social work education.

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CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM FORMULATION

In the United States, the number of people over the age of 65 is expected to grow immensely, from 43.1 million in 2012 to 83.7 million in 2050 (Ortman, Velkoff, & Holgan, 2014). The growth of the aging population is an effect of the baby boomer generation. By 2050, the baby boomers that remain alive will have succeeded the age of 80 (Ortman et al, 2014). The aging of America will have consequences that will affect policies, social services, Medicare, social security, medical practices, families, businesses, and the need for care providers (Otrman et al, 2014).

As the baby boomer cohort continues to age, the available care will subside if policymakers do not understand this population's needs. In 2012, individuals between the ages of 18-64 took up 62.8 percent of the population. However, as the baby boomers age, the individuals between the ages of 18-64 will drop to 57.3 percent by 2030 (Ortman et al, 2014). This is problematic because as baby boomers age, care will be scarce.

The growing number of aging individuals in the United States and globally have created an urgency for social workers, and other professional systems to reevaluate the needs of this population. Self-neglect, financial abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, isolation, mental health and others are all problems that social workers currently work to reduce. As the aging population continues to grow, the help needed will continue to grow as well (Acierno et al., 2010).

It is understood that regardless of specialization, social workers will meet individuals who are aging regardless of the field worked in. Child welfare workers will be working with grandchildren of grandparents who are given the opportunity through next of kin to raise these children, versus allowing the welfare and/or foster system to take on guardianship of these children (Baker & Silverstein, 2008). Grandparents are raising approximately 7 million grandchildren in the United States currently (Baker & Silverstein, 2008). This statistical evidence illustrates the vast number of social workers that will meet families, including grandparents and children that are high risk for entering the child welfare and foster systems. Regardless of this evident information, social work students show to have a high regard for working in child welfare than any other field in social work (Goncalves et al., 2011).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics [BSL] (2018), health care social workers employment is expected to grow by 20 percent, which is faster than any other field in social work. Health care social workers work with aging individuals and their families. Health care social workers help families adjust to life changes, such as an increase in medication, treatment options, and lifestyle adjustments (BLS, 2018). Currently there are 317,600 social workers in the field of child, family, and school social workers, and there are only 176,500 health care social workers caring for the aging. By the year 2026, health care social workers employment is projected to grow and will need 212,000 healthcare social workers (BSL, 2018).

Aging individuals experience loss, life transitions, grief, adjustment disorders, and other mental health issues (Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson, & Feldman, 2000). Professionals are needed to address these needs within the aging population, but as mentioned there is a severe lack of social workers who are educated in the field of gerontology, and therefore the demands the aging population needs are at high risk of not being met (Scarlarich et al., 2000). Thousands of new social workers are needed to meet the needs of the aging population, but only 3 percent of graduating social work students have chosen geriatric social work as a specialization (Scarlarich et al., 2000, Cummings et al., 2005; Snyder, Wesley, Lin, & May, 2008). More worryingly, the most recent Annual Survey of Social Work Programs conducted by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in 2017 found that gerontology is not a popular option for placement among social work students. Areas such as community mental health, child welfare, family services, and school social work are all more attractive field placements for students than aging/gerontology (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore why gerontology does not attract more social workers. The prospective lack of geriatric social workers is alarming due to the growing number of aging individuals across America and throughout the rest of the world. It is also alarming to realize that social work students,

despite the dire need in gerontology, prefer to enter different placements (CSWE, 2017). This study took a qualitative approach to answer the following question: Why are social work students underrepresented in aging/gerontology placements as opposed to other areas of the profession?

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

The findings from this study will have major implications for the social work profession at the micro level. This study will contribute to a greater understanding as to why social work students are underrepresented in the field of gerontology, which will illustrate the changes that need to be made within the curriculum at the university level. By illustrating these changes needed to be made, it would be a hope that the different schools of social work can encourage more students to specialize in gerontology.

This study will also have macro implications in the social work field. This study will assess if social work students are currently covertly practicing ageism, which goes against the National Association of Social Worker's *Code of Ethics*. By understanding why social work students do not specialize in gerontology as often, this can also encourage different policy reform in the schools of social work. The phase of the generalist intervention process informed by this study was the assessment phase, which explored why social work students are scarce in gerontology.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Work Students Underrepresented when Working with Aging

The aging population is increasing at an exponential rate (Gonçalves et al., 2011). This chapter covers reasons why social work students may be underrepresented when working with aging clients. This chapter reviews past literature, such as ageism and other stereotyping behaviors, interest in other fields, and a lack of competence in the field of gerontology. Two theories that support this research and are congruent with the current study is Social Learning Theory and Terror Management Theory. Social Learning Theory will be explained and presented as to how it relates to reasons social work students may be underrepresented when working with aging clients. Terror Management Theory is another framework that may explain why social work students and professionals avoid working with aging clients all together.

Ageism

Ageism is discrimination based on an individual or groups age (Azulai, 2014). Ageism can be utilized against any person or group regardless of age, but most of the ageism seen in the United States negatively affects the older population (Azulai, 2014; Cummings et al., 2005). Ageism has major implications for the field of social work, and although the Code of Ethics explicitly states that social workers shall not practice discrimination in any form, including discrimination based on age, ageism is prevalent in the field of social work

currently. Ageism affects the well-being of the individuals who are experiencing this form of discrimination (Azulai, 2014). Other discriminations such as sexism and racism has been fully studied and addressed in social work curriculum, but ageism seems to be understudied in the field (Azulai, 2014). Ageism is prevalent in the field of social work, and this needs to be addressed (Azulai, 2014).

Research supports the idea that social work students are practicing ageism. Cummings et al. (2005), supports the ideology that ageism is practiced among social work students and concluded that ageism and negative stereotypes on the aging are reasons why social work students are not seeking a career related to gerontology social work. According to Cummings et al. (2005), working with elderly clients lacks the so-called charm, or glamour compared to working in family therapy or working in child welfare. Cummings et al. (2005) further explained that social work students consider working with elderly lower in ranking and less appealing, and time and time again studies have shown that social work students rate working with elderly clients the less preferred career choice (Cummings et al, 2005). This study is quite dated, and more research is required to determine why social work students are reluctant to working in the field of gerontology and if ageism is still relevant in the field of social work or not.

Interest in Other Areas

Research shows that social work students will display interest with this population if the student has a desire to understand the aging process or if the student takes an elective course in gerontology (Snyder, Wesley, Lin, & May, 2008). Other research suggests that taking classes in gerontology will not spark an interest in social work students desire to work with aging, but reports how students must present pre-existing interest in the field of gerontology. So education alone will not contribute to interest in working with the aging (Snyder et al., 2008).

According to Goncalves et al. (2011), four variables attributed to social work students' interest in working with aging individuals: convictions towards the aging, a lack of former contact with aging individuals, exceptional knowledge about aging individuals is inadequate and demographic information such as gender and/or age. Although factors such as demographic information and past contact with aging individuals cannot be adjusted, an individual's perception, and knowledge is subjective and can be changed.

Conflicting findings were presented by Allan and Johnson's (2008) study, while Goncalves et al.'s (2011) research found that former contact with aging individuals should add interest to working with this population, Allan and Johnson's (2008) work revealed that the frequency of former contact with aging individuals does not add to the interest in working with this population .

Allan and Johnson (2008) pointed out that the frequency of former contact will not make an impact on the want to work with this population. Rather the quality of the contact is more important, which is something that Goncalves and colleagues did not mention in their 2011's study. Meanwhile, Allan and Johnson (2008) challenged another inconsistency in the literature by arguing that demographic information such as age and/or gender is not related to the shortage of social work students in gerontology. Instead, the level of knowledge or education in gerontology was the sole determinant of the level of interest for students to pursue a career with an aging population (Allan & Johnson, 2008). Both studies analyzed above demonstrated a shortfall of knowledge in the field of gerontology social work related to the lack of interest social work students display in pursuing a career related to gerontology (Allan & Johnson, 2008; Goncalves et al., 2011). Therefore, more research must be conducted.

Lack of Competence

Stereotypes often stem from a lack of knowledge or misconception of an individual or an entire population, such as the elderly (Robinson, Gustafson, & Popovich, 2008). Stereotypes can influence perception and opinion, and then creates a negative image of an individual or group based on generalized characteristics that are often untrue (Robinson et al., 2008). Since knowledge / education decreases stereotyping, then adding curriculum should benefit social work students who are unequipped and unaware of the ever-growing needs of the aging population.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation regulates social work curriculum and assumes the responsibility of the social work student to reach cultural competency in many different aspects, including the aging (Damron-Rodriguez, 2008). Therefore, the social work student is responsible for gaining competency, and minimizing biases to vulnerable oppressed groups while in school. Competence-based education, including social work, requires specific skills of the social work student upon graduation, to meet certain criteria, such as high performance and skills in a variety of settings, including providing services to the older population to practice effectively, which is cultural competency (Damron-Rodriguez, 2008).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Albert Bandura developed Social Learning Theory in 1977 and this theory states that individuals learn behaviors of other people by observing and interacting in a social environment (Bandura, 1977). The observer is said to act in similar ways of the individuals being observed (Smith & Berge, 2009). Social Learning Theory is highly utilized in social and behavioral science literature (Hill, Song, & West, 2009; Krumboltz, Mitchell & Jones, 1976; Rosenstock, Strecher, & Becker, 1988). This theory may explain why social work students are dodging gerontology and creating forms of stereotyping against the aging. Studies suggest that perceptions of older people are a response to a learned behavior, stemmed from history, and cultural background (Robinson et al., 2008). Studies

also show how negative stereotyping of older people begins as early as elementary school, and this perception only expands into adolescence and transpires into early adulthood (Robinson et al., 2008). Social learning theory has three components: observational learning, imitation, and behavior modeling (Smith & Berge, 2009).

Observational learning takes place in a variety of settings, including school settings (Smith & Berge, 2009). Observation will take place prior to new actions occurring for the observer, so for instance social work students may observe other students choosing not to take up an interest in curriculum focused on the aging, and this will then be repeated by the observer. Imitation is another component to social learning theory, in which post observation individuals adopt and imitate the behavior (Smith & Berge, 2009). The last element of social learning theory is behavior modeling. Behavior modeling will involve the observer taking positive outcomes of the observed behavior and begins to imitate the behavior (Smith & Berge, 2009). Therefore, if a social work student observes a professional social worker succeeding in other fields other than gerontology, the observer social work student may refrain from pursuing a career in gerontology and pursue another field to work in.

Social Learning Theory has a quality-based score of 41 out of 45 based on Joseph and Macgowan's (2019) Theory Evaluation Scale. The Theory Evaluation Scale (TES), assesses the merits and shortcomings of theories through nine different criteria: coherence, conceptual clarity, philosophical

assumptions, connection with previous research, testability, empiricism, boundaries, usefulness for social work practice (client context), and human agency (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019) . The scale utilizes an item-level score ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest point possible and 5 being the highest points possible in grading the various topics related to theory evaluation in the TES. The scoring scale ranges from 1-10= Poor; 10-19=Fair; 20-29= Good; and 30-45= Excellent. The Social Learning Theory rates an excellent score according to the TES and is a reliable theory to use in relating to the current study of social work students' underrepresentation in gerontology.

Terror management theory is a psychological theory that may also explain why social work students are avoiding a career in gerontology. Terror management theory suggests that prejudice attitudes towards the aging is a defense mechanism that individuals utilize to mask the consideration of future mortality (Chonody & Wang, 2014). According to this theory, aging individuals serve as a reminder of death, and therefore individuals will form a barrier with older adults. This creates stereotypes and negative attitudes towards the elderly (Chonody & Wang, 2014). This study has not been tested among social work student's avoidance to working with the aging, but if a social work student had feelings of increased anxiety related to death and aging, the less likely one would want to work with someone faced with the possibility of mortality (Chonody & Wang, 2014). Terror management theory generated a score 29 on the TES. This

score indicates a good quality of this theory, which can be used to comprehend the underrepresentation of social work students in gerontology.

Limitations of the Literature

A lack of research and a lack of interest in working with individuals that represent the fast growing population need examining. There is a need for helping professionals in geriatric practice, but as the trends of aging individuals increase, the number of individuals specializing in the field of gerontology appears to decrease. Students in helping professions are portraying a severe lack of interest in working with individuals that are aging (Goncalves et al., 2011). Qualitative research projects are needed to determine the reasons why social work students dodge gerontology-based fields. The current research sought to help fill that gap by exploring the perceptions of social work students on gerontology. This study focused on graduate social work students located in Southern California.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of why the proposed study utilized qualitative methods using an exploratory study design. This chapter covers the strengths and limitations in utilizing an exploratory methodological study design. This chapter describes the sampling methods used and justifications for the sampling methods chosen are presented. General questions are listed for the reader to understand the topics addressed in this study. This chapter also illustrates the instrument created for the specific purposes of this unique qualitative research. The procedures as to how the data was collected, as well as how this research protected human subjects who participated in this study will be discussed. Finally, the data analysis pertaining to qualitative research will be examined in this chapter.

Study Design

This study utilized a qualitative method to access information that a quantitative study is unable to access, such as one's lived experiences. The purpose of a qualitative study is to become familiar with basic qualities of human participants. After analyzing the study, researchers developed well-grounded ideas as to why social work students avoid the field of gerontology. A qualitative

methodology allows researchers to gain real life opinions and explanations. On the contrary, using a qualitative design limits the number of participants that a study can accommodate. In fact, the process of data collection, transcription, and data analysis is quite time consuming in qualitative research. Another limitation associated with this research paradigm pertains to the lack of objectivity and generalizability.

Sampling

This exploratory study utilized open-ended questions to capture the human experience presented by the participants. The data was collected from 58 students enrolled in graduate social work schools across Southern California (N= 58). The researchers used the snowball sampling technique to gather data. Demographic characteristics of the study participants are provided in the “Results” section.

Data Collection and Instruments

The researchers asked the participants a variety of questions consisting of eighteen open-ended questions on a questionnaire (please refer to Appendix A for a complete description of the questionnaire). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the researchers developed the questionnaire themselves which was then tested for face validity. The questions mostly assessed for the participants’

knowledge about the aging population, their experience with that population, and their potential placements in gerontology.

Procedures

The researchers administered an open-ended questionnaire to a range of MSW students. To avoid fatigue bias, the researchers allowed the participants two weeks to return completed questionnaires. Before dispersing the questionnaires, every participant was given time to ask questions about the study and review the consent forms to fill out. After each participant had a clear understanding of the study, the researchers informed the participants that a two-week timeframe was granted to complete the open-ended questionnaire. Out of 65 questionnaires distributed during the Winter 2019 Quarter, 58 were returned completed, an 89 percent return rate.

Protection of Human Subjects

The confidentiality and identity of each participant was of utmost importance to the researchers of this project. The participants did not record their names on the questionnaire but simply wrote an X on the line where a name would have gone. After the researchers received the questionnaire back from the participants, the researchers numbered the questionnaires to create an organized system of the returning questionnaires. Prior to the questionnaire disbursement, each participant read and signed the informed consent. After one

year has passed since the completion of the study, all confidential materials will be shredded.

Data Analysis

This study is a qualitative research design due to the researchers' use of open-ended questionnaires. The researchers assigned an identification number to each questionnaire. The data collected was transcribed and then arranged into codes. Similar codes were then categorized into themes (thematic analysis). That is, the themes emerged from the responses provided by the participants, thereby constituting the findings of this research.

Summary

This study examined the reasons why social work students are underrepresented in the field of gerontology and what barriers may exist, and what possible motivators can be created to encourage more social work students to take up a career in gerontology. The participants were encouraged to be straightforward and to answer each question honestly. Having participants anonymously complete the questionnaire at home decreased bias significantly. Qualitative methods best fit this study in order to gather as much subjective and detailed data from participants as possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Frequency Distributions

Demographic characteristics of the study participants are provided in Table 1 below. As demonstrated in the said table, half of the participants were enrolled in full-time programs and the other half were in part-time programs. Slightly more than half of participants were between the ages of 25-31 and approximately one quarter of them were between the ages of 18-24. From an academic standing perspective, most participants were first year students. In terms of location, more than half of participants resided in San Bernardino County. Most participants attended California State University San Bernardino. Over three quarters of the participants were female.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Characteristics [baseline (N = 58)]

Variable	N	%	Variable	N	%
<i>Age</i>	58	<i>100</i>	<i>County of Residence</i>	58	<i>100</i>
18-24	13	22	San Bernardino	33	57
25-31	30	52	Riverside	17	29
32-38	6	10	Los Angeles	4	7
39-45	3	5	Other	4	7
45 and over	6	10			
<i>Gender</i>	58	<i>100</i>	<i>University Attending</i>	58	<i>100</i>
Female	46	79	CSUSB*	53	91
Male	12	21	Other	5	9
<i>Program</i>	58	<i>100</i>	<i>Academic Standing</i>	58	<i>100</i>
Full time	30	52	1 st year student	47	81
Part-time	28	48	2 nd year student	9	16
	0	0	3 rd year student	2	3
*California State University San Bernardino					

Findings

Overall, social work students (the participants) expressed favorable opinions of elders. Most of the participants considered the aging population as a source of wisdom. There was no support for ageism in the analyzed data. Some participants reported their level of comfort taking care of their own relatives who were above 65. However, factors other than discrimination prevented participants from even considering the pursuit of a career in the field of gerontology. These factors, which constitute the major themes arising from the data, are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Major Study Themes

1) Lack of Knowledge about Gerontology
2) Misconceptions about the Elderly Population
a) Poor remuneration/lack of opportunities
b) Exposure to suffering, dying, and death
c) Anticipated difficulty working with the elderly population
3) Lack of Incentives
4) Preference for other Social Work Areas

As demonstrated in Table 2, there were four major themes associated with the findings of this research: lack of knowledge about gerontology, misconceptions about the elderly population, lack of incentives, and preference for other social work areas. The theme related to misconceptions about the elderly encompasses three sub-themes: poor remuneration, exposure to suffering, dying, and death, and anticipated difficulty working with older adults. The aforementioned themes and sub-themes are described in depth below.

Lack of Knowledge about Gerontology

The first theme that emerged from the data is how social work students expressed a lack of knowledge in relation to the field of gerontology. Despite social work being a profession that embraces gerontology, most of the participants reported having little knowledge about gerontology. Overall, approximately 90% of participants reported that they do not consider themselves

to be knowledgeable about the population over the age of 65. Participants reported:

Participant #9: No, I've never taken a class in gerontology and I have limited exposure interacting with the elderly.

Participant #32: I do not consider myself knowledgeable about the population of age 65 and over because I had no interaction with the elderly growing up. I also have not had any gerontology classes.

Participant #46: No. I feel there has not been enough classes to discuss about the elderly as a population.

Participant #47: Not knowledgeable enough to provide services to the population.

Misconceptions about the Elderly Population

Another major theme was misconceptions about the elderly populations. This theme has three sub-themes: poor remuneration/lack of opportunities, exposure to suffering, dying, and death, and anticipated difficulty working with the elderly population. Many participants expressed these misconceptions about the elderly through the detailed responses in the open-ended questionnaire.

Poor Remuneration / Lack of Opportunities. A sub-theme that emerged from the data was that social work students expressed lack of opportunities and lower income in the field of gerontology. Participants expressed the lack of opportunities/poor remuneration in gerontology as follows:

Participant #53: Perhaps the pay or availability of jobs in gerontology might be a factor. Also, there might be less rewards or satisfaction associated with gerontology, or perhaps they lack understanding or experience in the area and are unwilling/disinterested to explore”

Participant #15: Students are victims of loans with high interest rates that accumulate. Students pursue employment that will help pay that debt; gerontology jobs do not pay well enough”.

Participant #38: Gerontology does not pay well and may not be exciting”

Participant #34: I want more job opportunities and more money.

Exposure to Suffering, Dying, and Death. Another sub-theme was how social work students expressed a fear of death and dying when contemplating working with elderly. This was a theme expressed by a significant number of study participants:

Participant #2: Seeing older adults makes people think about death and it brings up their own fears. Children tend to be the desired field. Many students do not understand the different ways that social workers can serve this population.

Participant #23: Students fear the aging/dying process and don't like older adults or don't know how to relate

Participant #28: The sadness of working with a dying population is hard and students have counter-transference with family members.

Participant #43: Watching the elderly decline is not pleasant.

Anticipated Difficulty Working with the Elderly Population. This sub-theme was expressed by students who felt social workers serving the elderly population may need additional skills in order to work in gerontology. A large percentage of participants also expressed the need for patience to work with this population as well:

Participant #6: Gerontology seems as though it would require extra skills.

Participant #51: They might think the gerontology area requires more physical effort such as nursing. I think they might think that area is much harder than others.

Participant # 41: They may have presumptions that this group is the hardest to work with.

Lack of Incentives

Another theme presented in the data was lack of incentives and/or stipends provided by universities to intern in gerontology. Therefore, students expressed a lack of motivation to pursue gerontology as a primary internship choice. Participants stated:

Some believe I don't want to turn into this person, the elderly is out of sight, out of mind, and there is no stipend in this field.

(Participant # 58)

Viewed as a “not exciting” field and there is lack of exposure and recruitment in gerontology due to there being no stipend.

(Participant # 43)

Preference for Other Social Work Areas

Another theme presented in this study was a lack of interest in gerontology. Students expressed interest in other areas such as child welfare, mental health, and medical social work. Gerontology has always been playing catch-up to other areas such as child welfare. Child welfare supplants gerontology because society and the media have a penchant for children as opposed to elders. This theme was expressed by the following participants:

Participant #2: Historically, social work services have been directed towards children and women. They are unaware of the needs of this population.

Participant #37: In my belief, gerontology is not as promoted as children services. We always think about the well-being of children and their safety. The elderly are overlooked.

Participant #32: Gerontology is not promoted as much as the child and mental health population.

Participant #17: Possibly because gerontology is not talked about enough compared to mental health, children and family services, and medical social work.

Based on the participants' responses in various questions, almost all understand there is a lack of interest among social work students and the field of gerontology.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Purpose

This study explored why social work students are underrepresented in gerontology. The tendency for social workers to dodge working with the elderly populations needs to change. As stated, the baby boomer generation is increasing at an accelerated rate and as this generation ages, social services aimed at helping the population will be ever-growing (Ortman et al., 2014). An array of social work is growing in fields that have to do with the aging population. For instance, the BLS (2018) pointed out how medical social work is estimated to grow faster than any other field of social work. The BLS (2018) also stated how more than half of social work students are going into the fields of child-welfare and that gerontology fields such as medical social work are not moving at the same rate. This research aimed at answering why social work students tend to avoid gerontology. Four themes were grounded in the data: Lack of knowledge about gerontology, misconceptions about the elderly population, lack of incentive in the field of gerontology, and a preference to work in other social work areas.

Consistencies with Previous Research

The findings in this research are consistent with other research in the field. In particular, the findings that a lack of knowledge about gerontology is conducive

to social work student's avoidance to working with aging populations was consistent with other studies. Snyder et al. (2008), reported that social work students who do not take gerontology courses, do not have contact with the elderly, or are not professionally exposed to aging clients will have an innate lack of knowledge to the field of gerontology.

Misconceptions about the elderly population was also found in the same study. Snyder et al. (2008) reported that social work student's attitude when working with the aging population is skewed and found that gerontology social work is perceived as low status work in comparison to other fields of social work. Snyder et al. (2008) also found that interest in gerontology social work was low in comparison to other fields.

The findings also reflect the work of Goncalves et al. (2011). Goncalves et al. (2011), found that interest in other areas besides gerontology and misconceptions and attitudes about the aging populations were reasons social work students are underrepresented in the field. The same study also found how social learning related to peer observation were reasons why social work students avoided working with the elderly (Goncalves et al., 2011).

Another study that is consistent with the current study is Cummings et al.'s (2005) research, which revealed social work students' perceptions about the elderly creates a barrier to specializing in the field. This idea is directly related to the current study in that social work students have a misconception about how working with the elderly. Cummings et al. (2005) explained how working with the

elderly is missing a glamour that can be found in other areas of social work such as child welfare or family therapy. Cummings et al. (2005) also explained that gerontology social work is perceived as low paying and requires special skills, which again is conducive to the current study. Cummings et al. (2005) also found that a lack of interest in the field of gerontology plays a factor in pursuing this area to work in, even though social work students believe gerontology is important and needed. The results also relate to Cummings et al.'s (2005) findings that showed how social work students lacked interest in working with the aging population and preferred working in other areas, such as child welfare and mental health.

Chonody & Wang (2014) also found that social work students have misconceptions when working with aging clientele. Chonody & Wang (2014) reported that a conscious effort made by social work students to avoid aging clientele by avoiding the elderly all together. Chonody & Wang (2014) contended that this is done because aging clients tend to remind social work students of their own mortality thus creating anxieties and negative attitudes about working with aging clients. Hence, the findings in this current research mirror the idea that aging clients remind social work students of death and dying.

Implications

Research

Besides being consistent with previous research, this study contributes significantly to the literature by revealing how the lack of stipend is keeping social work students away from gerontology. Although most schools of social work offer generous stipends, gerontology cannot compete with areas such as mental health and child welfare. It is necessary to implement a gerontology stipend to attract more students to this field. This study also contributes to the literature by exploring the perceptions of a considerably large number of students in Southern California. Previous research mostly utilized quantitative measures when assessing social work student's representation in the field of gerontology. This research utilized qualitative measures and allowed students to explain fully why social work students are underrepresented in gerontology fields.

Theory

The findings of this study found that the participants have a fear of death and dying when thinking about working with the elderly. This finding correlates with Terror Management Theory by Chonody & Wang (2014). This theory states that aging individuals serve as a reminder of death, which can create barriers when working with the elderly population. Several participants expressed resistance to working with the elderly because of being reminded of mortality and the end stage of life. The findings of this study also included the participants expressing that the elderly are known to be a difficult population to work with and

therefore may require additional patience or skills. These findings correlate with Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1977). This theory states that human beings learn behavior by observing others and therefore draw conclusions about specific populations. Studies suggest that perceptions of older people are a response to a learned behavior, stemmed from history, and cultural background (Robinson et al., 2008).

Social Work Education

Many of the participants in this study expressed a lack of knowledge for the field of gerontology and the elderly population as a whole. Approximately 90% of participants in this study reported that they do not consider themselves knowledgeable about the population over the age of 65. This may indicate the need for schools of social work to implement educational workshops on gerontology on their campuses to bring more awareness to this field especially with the high disparities among geriatric social workers. Classroom material and discussions should also include exploring the aging population more in-depth as well as debunking myths surrounding the population.

For example, two of the misconceptions in this study could be easily defeated with proper education on gerontology. Contrary to popular belief, organizations that serve elderly populations pay well and there are plenty of jobs available in gerontology. This is the fastest growing job sector due to baby boomers aging; as mentioned, the aging population is expected to double by the year 2050 (Ortman et al, 2014). Meanwhile, not all elders are suffering and dying.

There are individuals over the age of 65 who are living and thriving in their daily lives. Most of the political and judicial leaders in the United States are septuagenarian or more.

Gerontology

The findings also have implications for the field of gerontology as a whole. The field of gerontology should advocate for the elderly population to increase interest in working within this field. If the field advocated for a stipend in gerontology, for schools of social work to improve their program material relating to the elderly, and for more funding, maybe there would be no shortage of social workers in this field. With the Baby Boomers retiring every day and the aging population expected to double, there is urgency for the field of gerontology to take new strides in helping to create better lives for the population so promised to serve.

Limitations

There are several shortcomings associated with the findings in this study. First, although the sample size is quite large for a qualitative study, it may have been beneficial to have more participants in order to increase diverse views and increase the significance level of the findings. Another limitation is that most participants were first year MSW students. The participants may have had limited views on gerontology due to their standing in the MSW program. Third, most participants resided in one geographic area and therefore attended the same

school of social work. Hence, the participants' views may not fully represent the views of social work students from different schools of social work.

Recommendations

For future research, social work students should be recruited from many schools of social work in different geographic areas. This will enrich the findings and increase the generalizability of the future studies. Additionally, future studies should study social workers who have successfully completed an MSW program and who have been actively working in the field of social work for some time. This will help future research by studying participants who are more experienced in the field, which may provide more diverse opinions. Furthermore, seeking to recruit a more demographically diverse population would also benefit future studies. This may require an increase in sample sizes.

APPENDIX A
SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Demographics

Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Other

Age Range: ☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-31 ☐ 32-38 ☐ 39-45 ☐ 45+

Ethnicity: ☐ Caucasian ☐ African American ☐ Hispanic ☐ Asian ☐ Other_____

County of Residence: ☐ San Bernardino ☐ Riverside ☐ Los Angeles ☐ Other_____

University Attending: ☐ CSUSB ☐ Other_____

Program: ☐ Full-Time ☐ Part-Time ☐ Online ☐ Other_____

Questions for Master of Social Work Students

1. What is your overall understanding of gerontology social work?
2. How would you see yourself contributing to gerontology?
3. How would you compare gerontology with other areas of social work in terms of salary?
4. How would you compare gerontology with other areas of social work in terms of job availability?
5. How would you compare gerontology with other areas of social work in terms of client population?
6. How would you compare gerontology with other areas of social work in terms of competence?
7. Tell me about your last internship, and current internship. Why did you choose this internship?

8. What field do you see yourself going into after graduation?
9. Do you ever see yourself working with elderly clients? Explain why or why not.
10. What elective did you choose for your foundation year elective? Why did you choose this elective? Was gerontology offered as an elective?
11. In the next 2 years, what is your dream job?
12. How were you brought up? Tell me about your culture and how the elderly is viewed.
13. Do you consider yourself to be knowledgeable about the population over the age of 65? Please explain.
14. Do you consider the elderly to be valuable in our society? Why or why not?
15. What is your experience with aging individuals? Was this experience pleasant? Explain.
16. Some social work students do not intern in gerontology. What reasons do you think could be associated with their decision to avoid gerontology?
17. Some social work students prefer non-gerontology electives. Why do you think this is the case?
18. Some social work students, after graduation, go ahead to work in areas other than gerontology. Why is that?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT



WE DEFINE THE *Future*

Academic Affairs
School of Social Work

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407

909.537.5501 | fax: 909.537.7029
<https://csbs.csusb.edu/social-work>

California State University, San Bernardino
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee
APPROVED 1/18/2019 VOID AFTER 1/19/2020
IRB# SW1924 CHAIR [Signature]

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine graduate level social work students' perceptions in working with the aging population. The study is being conducted by Ashlee Crosson and Kelsey Goodwin, graduate students, under the supervision of Dr. Rigaud Joseph, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine graduate level social work students' perceptions in working with the aging population.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked questions on the current status of their internship and past internships, their future career goals in social work, their thoughts on working with elderly clients, their cultural views of the elderly, and their past experiences with aging individuals.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: The interview will last approximately one hour.

RISKS: Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Joseph at (909) 537-5507.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2019.

I agree to be audio recorded: ____ YES ____ NO

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

Place an X mark here

Date

The California State University • Bakersfield • Channel Islands • Chico • Dominguez Hills • East Bay • Fresno • Fullerton • Humboldt • Long Beach • Los Angeles
Maritime Academy • Monterey Bay • Northridge • Pomona • Sacramento • SAN BERNARDINO • San Diego • San Francisco • San Jose • San Luis Obispo • San Marcos • Sonoma • Stanislaus

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

The researchers were responsible for soliciting participants for the study, which equaled a total of fifty-eight participants. Regarding the Data Analysis, researchers were responsible for transcribing and coding their own data collected. Once independent thematic analysis was completed, the researchers combined their data. Researchers collaboratively developed tables that illustrated the findings. Once the study was complete, the researchers teamed up to create a poster to illustrate the findings from the study.